

12401 SUSSEX LANE (HOUSE)
(The Manor House)
Belair at Bowie, Maryland
Bowie
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS MD-1267
MD-1267

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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12401 SUSSEX LANE (HOUSE) (The Manor House)

HABS No. MD-1267

NOTE: Please see the following historical reports for additional information about the history of Belair at Bowie, Maryland:

Belair at Bowie, Maryland (overview)	HABS No. MD-1253
12418 Stonehaven Lane (The Cape Cod)	HABS No. MD-1254
12420 Stonehaven Lane (The Cape Cod)	HABS No. MD-1255
12408 Stonehaven Lane (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1257
12500 Swirl Lane (The Colonial, 4 bedroom)	HABS No. MD-1260
12100 Tulip Grove Drive (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1263
12400 Shadow Lane (The Colonial, 3 bedroom)	HABS No. MD-1264
Belair Bath & Tennis Club	HABS No. MD-1265
12405 Sussex Lane (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1269
12413 Salem Lane (The Country Clubber)	HABS No. MD-1270
12406 Skylark Lane (The Country Clubber)	HABS No. MD-1271

Location: 12401 Sussex Lane, "Belair at Bowie, Maryland," Bowie, Prince Georges County, Maryland.

Significance: The house at number 12401 Sussex Lane was the display model for The Manor House, the largest considered for construction at Belair. It was one of twelve models built between 1960 and 1967 on Sussex Lane, which comprised the sales and exhibit center for Belair at Bowie, Maryland. They line the south side of the street, facing north across a grassy park in full view of MD Route 450, which at the time was one of the major east-west arteries between Washington and Annapolis. This particular example was ultimately the only one built at Belair as the firm discontinued the model before any were constructed elsewhere in the development. The building was subsequently used by Levitt and Sons as its sales office until the completion of Belair's single-family sections in 1968 at which time it was reconverted into a house and, like the other display models, sold for residential occupancy.

Historian: James A. Jacobs, HABS

Description: The house at 12401 Sussex Lane is located at southeast corner of the intersection of Sussex Lane and Belair Drive, which is the primary thoroughfare through the sections of Belair located to the south of MD Route 450.

Known at the time of its construction as the "Southern Colonial" variation of The Manor House model, the main portion of the house is, accordingly, fronted by a two-story

portico formed by an extension of the gable roof that is supported by four evenly-spaced piers that loosely suggest the Doric Order.¹ The piers define the facades three bays with paired windows flanking the centered front door on the first floor with two single windows per bay above. The neo-colonial façade behind the portico has a form that was known in period literature as a “garrison front.” Such an arrangement has a second floor that overhangs the first in a manner was believed to recall a supposed defensive strategy used in construction of seventeenth-century houses of New England. The overhang is sheathed in the same siding used on the remainder of the house; only the first-floor of the street façade is veneered in brick. A six-panel door with sidelights, window shutters, and decorative panels below the pairs of first-floor windows complete the colonial image.

A single-story, three-bay wing is positioned to the left of the main block. The outer two bays originally contained arched door openings for the double garage, which has since been enclosed with a single, double-hung window located in place of each door. In order to keep costs down, Levitt and Sons limited to the façade the more expensive sheathing materials and architectural decoration that give the houses their neo-colonial and neo-traditional stylistic expression. Except for the use of shutters on side-wall windows in some of the model variations, the rear and side walls of the Belair houses were essentially unadorned and utilitarian, clad in simple, colored asbestos shingles and showing little of the symmetry or balance organizing the window and door openings on the façade.

History: Although The Country Clubber was the largest and most expensive house that Levitt and Sons put into production at Belair, the company had initially also considered a second, even more spacious luxury model for the development known as The Manor House. Levitt and Sons’s return to marketed luxury models was well underway by January 1960, when *House & Home* included a photograph of what later was known as the Southern Colonial variation of The Manor House still under construction at the Levittown, New Jersey, exhibit and sales center. The sign posted in front read, “The Country Clubber/opening in February/price about \$25,000.”² A furnished model opened to the public at Levittown in March with *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reporting on its luxury lineage within the company: “largest in a series of Country Clubber designs built by Levitt & Sons since the war, it is the first to feature Colonial styling.”³ Some months later, on August 28, the same newspaper reported that “a new Country Clubber priced at \$20,990 went on display last week at Levittown, N. J.”⁴ Although also exhibiting “Colonial styling,” the Cape Cod form of this second, less expensive Country Clubber more clearly related to its 1950s predecessors bearing the same name. The wording of the article suggests that the two models might have still been generally known as the

¹ There were four façade variations developed for The Manor House.

² “The Challenge of Right Now: How to Succeed with Today’s Serious Buyers,” *House & Home* 17 (Jan. 1960): 123.

³ “Levittown Unveils Country Club Model Priced at \$25,000,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 13 Mar. 1960, sec. W: 19.

⁴ “Levitt Opens \$20,990 Model Country Clubber,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 28 Aug. 1960, sec. W: 17.

“\$25,000 Country Clubber” and the “\$20,990 Country Clubber;” yet, difficulties in successfully marketing two distinct models using one name was surely already evident to Levitt and Sons and in the process of being remedied. One month later, on the eve of the opening of Belair, the more expensive of the two had become the “Manor model,” or, The Manor House.⁵

Most of the new models that Levitt and Sons offered for sale in Levittown and Belair during the latter half of 1960 were improved versions of the ones constructed in the first completed sections of Levittown; however, the two luxury models had no precedent in New Jersey and, because of this, were incorporated into the two developments in different ways. In New Jersey, Levitt and Sons segregated them in a new section called Windsor Park.⁶ The company’s primary motivation for doing this was most likely a desire for consistency between the first completed sections of Levittown, which alternated one-story, one-and-one-half story, and two-story types, and the later sections containing the redesigned versions of these models. It is also probable that Levitt and Sons believed that the comparative expense of the new models would demand their own neighborhood in order to make them a market success. With an entirely blank slate in Maryland, the company seems to have at first intended to mix the redesigned and entirely new models together, providing even greater variation in the streetscape. Levitt and Sons may have also assumed that, as a new residential development in the suburbs of a white collar city, Belair would attract a more solidly middle-class cohort than Levittown, thus lessening the real and perceived socioeconomic differences between the purchasers of a Cape Cod versus those of a Manor House.⁷

Although the Levitt exhibit and sales center at Belair was launched on October 8, 1960, the Southern Colonial variation of The Manor House along Sussex Lane did not open to the public as a furnished model until February 1961.⁸ It was a large, stately, two-story

⁵ “Levitt Ready to Unveil His Belair,” *The Washington Post* 1 Oct. 1960, sec. B: 1, for “Manor model;” “Belair Homes Open,” *The Sun* (Baltimore) 9 Oct. 1960, sec. C: 2, for Manor House.

⁶ “Levitt Plans Delivery of \$20,900-\$25,000 Models in February,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 4 Dec. 1960, sec. W: 15; “Levittown Unveils Country Club Model,” W-19. When Levitt and Sons “unveiled” what became known as The Manor House in March 1960, officials in the firm suggested that the new, up-market Windsor Park was part of an overall “‘master plan’ for the 16,000-home community.” While sales appear to have been brisk in comparatively luxe Windsor Park, Levitt and Sons still reconceived and further refined the development of this section, remarketing it as Country Club Ridge beginning in 1965. The section was laid-out around the golf course of the Willingboro Country Club and along Rancocas Creek. Among the four spacious models initially offered there was a five-bedroom version of The Country Clubber, which by that time had been renamed The Framingham. The streets of Windsor Park were fully integrated into the new development, but they retained their “W” names rather than taking on new “C” names as in the rest of Country Club Ridge.

⁷ Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (1967) (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 281, for a similar aversion to Country Clubbers at Belair.

⁸ “Manor House Opens Today,” *The Washington Post* 18 Feb. 1961, sec. B: 12. A *Washington Post* feature on 1 Oct. 1960 included a photograph of a seemingly completed Manor House; however, it appears that, for a presently unknown reason, the model was not opened to the public until five months

house with a traditional floor plan that more reflected houses at the upper end of the market constructed ten or twenty years earlier than most contemporary houses of its size. Whether because of this delay or because they had pushed the limits of consumer choice within a single development, interest in The Manor House was so sluggish that Levitt and Sons quickly discontinued the offering and turned the model house into their sales offices.⁹ With this change, The Country Clubber became the only marketed “luxury” model constructed at Belair, and even it was a hard sell with Levitt and Sons discontinuing its placement among the other models after the completion of the first two sections. The company subsequently opened a small section composed only of Country Clubbers before stopping its construction altogether at Belair. Although having less square footage than The Manor House, the redesigned versions of the three- and four-bedroom Colonials introduced at Levittown and Belair in 1960 were still well above the national average in size and better reflected the latest ideas about planning, in particular functional flexibility and circulation. Because of this, The Colonials remained relevant to prospective buyers in the 1960s and were popular two-story models for many years after Levitt and Sons abandoned The Manor House. The house at the former Levitt exhibit and sales center on Sussex Lane was the only example of The Manor House built in Belair.

Selected Bibliography:

“Belair Homes Open.” The Sun (Baltimore) 9 Oct. 1960. Sec. C: 2.

“The Challenge of Right Now: How to Succeed with Today’s Serious Buyers,” House & Home 17 (Jan. 1960): 121-34

Gans, Herbert J. The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community. 1967. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.

“Levitt Opens \$20,990 Model Country Clubber.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 28 Aug. 1960. Sec. W: 17.

“Levitt Plans Delivery of \$20,900-\$25,000 Models in February.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 4 Dec. 1960. Sec. W: 15.

“Levitt Ready to Unveil His Belair.” The Washington Post 1 Oct. 1960. Sec. B: 1.

“Levittown Unveils Country Club Model Priced at \$25,000.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 13 Mar. 1960. Sec. W: 19.

later. Indecision about whether to actually put the model into production at Belair might have been the cause of the delay. The company had stopped taking orders for the model by the time that the first residents of Belair occupied their houses in October 1961.

⁹Bob Reid, “Reminiscences from Belair’s First Settler,” Bowie Museum Archives at Belair, Bowie, Maryland.

“Manor House Opens Today.” The Washington Post 18 Feb. 1961, sec. B: 12.

Reid, Bob. “Reminiscences from Belair’s First Settler.” Bowie Museum Archives at the Belair Mansion. Bowie, Maryland.

Project Information:

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